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Editorial

WHAT IS A MINISTER TO DO?

We cannot escape from the biblical and theological criticism that is going on about us. It is not confined to the professional students and interpreters of the Bible; increasingly it is spreading among the people at large. Even books and magazines outside of the theological field are discussing questions of biblical interpretation and theological belief. Many laymen are publicly discussing these difficult and vital problems. The graduates of our better institutions of learning are dealing with the Bible and with Christian thought. It is not that the world is facing for the first time these difficult problems, but that a larger number of people than ever before are concerning themselves directly with them, and that progress is making.

The minister could not, if he would, ignore all this—unless, indeed, he were to betake himself to the remote border of modern life where the currents of thought scarcely penetrate. If he is to be a factor in things as they now are, he must think with and think for the people around him. He stands, at least potentially, in the position of a leader of religious thought, and the people expect him to lead. His opportunity requires that he shall neither lag behind his people nor go so far ahead of them that they shall lose sight of him. His opportunity also requires that he qualify himself to be truly wise, and that he work in such a way as to be truly helpful.

What, then, is a minister to do? How shall he relate himself to the current biblical and theological criticism? Is the following course a wise and practicable one for the *average* minister to pursue?

1. TO KEEP CALM. The first duty would seem to be to keep calm in the midst of these controversies. The world has been going on for centuries in spite of such controversies; indeed, history reads as though progress had been made by means of these controversies. The situation is not so critical and serious, religious faith and life are not so endangered, as a superficial observer is apt to think. The foundations are not being overthrown, even if they are being somewhat modified and enlarged. We owe it to ourselves as well as to others to rest in full confidence upon the truth we have, and to direct our chief attention to being and doing what is known to be right. Panic and agitation and calumny are injurious.

2. TO GIVE ATTENTION. The minister will at the same time not close his eyes to the currents of thought which are moving through the field of biblical interpretation and theology. These things concern him; they have an important bearing upon his work; they are more or less a part of the life of his people. Therefore they cannot be ignored. They are not mere manifestations of restlessness of mind. They are not merely the products of evil forces at work in the world. They are rather a factor in the progress of humanity. A minister, then, will give his attention to these currents of biblical and theological thought. He will endeavor to understand them, to contribute to them, to aid in the solution of the problems, and to gather for himself and his people such benefits as this movement affords.

3. TO LEARN MUCH. It immediately becomes apparent that certain qualifications of knowledge are necessary if the minister would grapple with these great questions. Biblical interpretation requires a thorough acquaintance with the historical facts concerning the Bible and within the Bible, with its literary features, and with its teaching. Such historical, literary, and theological knowledge does not come to anyone by intuition, but must be acquired by years of faithful and well-directed study. No less does the adequate consideration of theological questions require a thorough and good training in philosophy, psychology, and the history of thought. The minister will be able to reach sound opinions only when he has furnished and trained his mind. The way to accomplish this is by learning much.

4. TO THINK WELL. But learning will not in itself lead to the

goal. Learning is an assistant to right thinking. That is to say, the thoughts of the past can help us to think, but should not save us the task of thinking. It is our duty to think. And what a privilege it is. What importance it gives us to feel that we too can think and should think for ourselves, as men of previous generations have done. Since the Protestant Reformation we have professed to believe that each man has a right to think for himself. But if he wishes to do this, he should equip himself as well as possible for thinking. If it is a man's duty to think, it is also his duty to think well; that is, to think with such an equipment and in such a way as to reach right conclusions. The minister has not only to think for himself, but he has to think for others, to show others how to think, and to help them to learn what to think.

5. **TO BE QUIET.** Some persons show a disposition to be noisy in their thinking and preaching. They conduct their investigations and deliberations in public, exhibiting the machinery of their thought. It not infrequently results that crudities are put out in the place of mature judgment, and that incomplete investigations are treated as though complete. To learn quietly, and to think quietly, to teach quietly and to preach quietly, seem desirable. Fussiness and sensationalism do not promote clear vision. The quiet worker accomplishes most with least friction.

6. **TO AVOID CONTROVERSY.** It is proverbial that the discussion of biblical interpretation and theological truth readily becomes controversial. Most men have an interest in these problems, have some ability and equipment to discuss them, and have the feeling that they are right in their opinions concerning them. A man who would be very modest concerning his knowledge, and the value of his opinion, about philology or philosophy or psychology may assume a different attitude regarding questions of the Bible and theology. Then, too, there is the dialectical process which is the ever-present weakness of a certain type of mind. The minister finds the dialectician ever present. He is always asking perplexing and unanswerable questions, and is always ready to argue about them, or anything else theological, to the end of time. The minister will seldom find it helpful, or a wise use of his working hours, to engage in these intellectual combats or diversions. The practical duties of his min-

istry will engage his time and his energy. If there is a place for theological controversy, it scarcely belongs to the parish.

7. TO PREACH THE GOSPEL. Nor is the pulpit the place in which to deal with the unsolved problems of biblical interpretation and theological thought. The pulpit discussion of controverted historical facts and theological formulations would in almost every case disturb a larger number of people than it helped. Few people in the average congregation are prepared—by knowledge, training, and mental ability—to grapple with the problems that are now under consideration. If the average minister, even with his exclusive devotion to theology and the long years of his special training in this field, is scarcely able to solve such problems, what can be expected of the average layman? To plunge him into such discussion is to carry him beyond his depth when he is not able to swim. The minister in his pulpit should deal with that which is certain and practical, leaving that which is disputed and theoretical for some other occasion. It cannot be said that the amount of what is certain is inadequate to the need of men. We do know how men should think, and live; and until men think and live in this way, the whole effort of the pulpit is needed in that direction. In other words, our preaching should be neither controversial nor critical nor speculative, but *constructive*, to the upbuilding, not of a systematic theology, but of goodness and faith.

8. TO HELP STUDENTS. But the minister may find in his church some few people who are able and have the desire to study through some of the problems of biblical interpretation and theological thought. If there are such, and especially if they are young people whose ideas are in the making, he will welcome the opportunity to assist them. He can arrange a course of study for them; he can suggest books the reading of which will help them; he can meet with them from week to week in a regular Bible class, or in his study. By some efficient method he can help them to find their way forward in these most interesting and vital questions. Refraining from the direct consideration of these matters in his pulpit work, he will nevertheless seek to train his congregation in such a way as to fit them for thinking clearly along these lines. His preaching will be built upon the best knowledge that he has and the best thinking that he does.

9. TO CONFER WITH OTHER MINISTERS. The minister is entitled to the sympathy, assistance, and co-operation which fraternal relations with other ministers can give. He will not allow himself to work in isolation. He will not try to think through his biblical and theological problems alone. If controversy is not generally helpful, it is equally true that discussion is most helpful. For ministers to think and talk frankly together, to pursue the study of common subjects, to read the same books and discuss them together—these constitute the chief means by which ministers in their parishes can go forward intellectually and spiritually. There are many indications that this means is being used and appreciated. Others should be encouraged to adopt it. Groups of ministers within a single locality, or in near-by localities, working together for more light on the Bible and theology, will succeed.

10. TO PROMOTE LIFE. Is it the primary duty of the *minister* to solve the historical and theological problems that confront us? The most that the professional scholar can do is, after a life completely given to the study of the problems, to make known to the public what conclusions he has reached. He cannot assume to have solved them for all time. Still less can the minister, whose time is chiefly given to practical work, take upon himself this task. Little by little the field of knowledge widens; but we are not in a position to anticipate that all the great historical and theological problems will at once find permanent solution. And since they are in uncertainty, they cannot be considered the fundamental and essential factors in life. Life must be lived while they are in process of solution. The business of the minister is to promote life, to increase goodness, to uphold righteousness, love, and service. He will direct his work to this end. He will give no undue prominence to problematical truth or facts. He will follow the example of Jesus, who did not include in his message to men a discussion of the historical problems of the Old Testament, or of the how and why of religious truth.